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Editorial — An eye for an I

Eye, not "the author", "the writer", or any other circumlocutory description of myself, but eye, Brian Hocking, am publicly and without shame pleading for the return of the first person, in all cases, singular and plural, to its modest but respectable position in scientific literature. This group of words provides the very brevity and precision that the present-day world needs. To outlaw the whole of the first person simply because some people have found difficulty in the discreet use of the nominative singular is, like total abstinence, an admission of weakness. More than that, this false modesty must have cost the printing presses of the world many millions of extra words over the last few years. Can they or the reading public spare the time?

How delightfully simple this is, this eye that we shun so scrupulously. Just one letter, and the simplest one at that. Just a line. Yet surely this is the most precise line in the language; no possible ambiguity here. It can mean only one thing. What about our alternative "the author"? It is ten times as long for a start. In some scientific papers many authors are referred to so that it becomes necessary to define him further as "the present author". So many times does "the present author" appear in some papers that eye come to regard him as the ever-present author. Although his personality is rarely present, he is far more conspicuous and demanding than if he were just an eye.

English has got along for some time now without its second person singular, although eye for one would welcome the return of the outspoken "Where art thou?" and "Thou shalt not". The use of the plural form is usually, after all, a false politeness, just as avoiding the eye is a false modesty. If we are not to have all of our first persons restored, where is it to end? And what have we left? Already nothing but second- and third-rate personal pronouns. And there appears to be no authority for all this; eye suspect an editorial conspiracy. This is what the authorities say:-

Perrin: "I can be used wherever it is needed. People with only average concern for themselves need not worry; the conceited will give themselves away anyway. Circumlocutions to get around the natural use of I are usually awkward and likely to attract attention to themselves." (p. 599)

Quiller - Couch: "... when man asks questions about his fortune or destiny he asks them most effectively in the first person." (p. 141)

Gowers: "Official prose is made unnecessarily ugly by a shyness of pronouns." (p. 74)

The only support eye can find for the outlawing of the first person is in the Royal Society publication "General Notes on the Preparation of Scientific Papers". It says, referring only to a synopsis (p. 24): "It is preferable to use the third person", but elsewhere (p. 2): "It may seem superfluous to state that the paper should be clear, precise, logical and brief... Experience shows that clarity and precision are best achieved by the use of short words and simple sentences." Eye can find no comments by Anderson and Thistle, or in The Canadian Government Editorial Style Manual.

The last stronghold of the first person was for some time the acknowledgment section of papers; here the occasional I and we still linger on, tolerated - or could it be overlooked? - by our painstaking editors. Perhaps this would be the best route of re-entry for the first person into scientific papers; surely it is here that clumsy circumlocutions are most inappropriate. There are two other constructions in which an author may still be able to sneak in a first person pronoun and get away with it: one is the reference to one of a number of joint authors as "one of us" - followed by the initials of the author referred to. The other is in the explanation of italics in a quotation from another author; with the best will in the world most editors boggle at the awful ambiguity of "author's italics".

In view of the editor's privileged use of the first person plural it is most unfitting that authors should be denied the right to use the singular. Editors, please, give us back our eyes.

Brian Hocking

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